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ABSTRACT

Numerous comprehension strategies can be used successfully with both children's literature and a basal reading series to help children focus on written text during reading. One of the most important techniques is developing background knowledge prior to reading--the overall purpose of which is to help readers relate their existing schemata to the selection of new schema to help develop concepts. Prediction is another comprehension strategy that may be used effectively by readers. Predicting the results of various actions can easily be incorporated into diverse reading situations. Emphasis should be on the thought process and not on "right" or "wrong" answers. Instruction in the components of text structure and its use in constructing meaning will aid in reading comprehension, as will discussion of imagery, a metacognitive skill directly related to reading. The ReQuest (Reciprocal Questioning) Technique involves the children and teacher silently reading portions of a text and alternately asking and answering questions related to the material. Besides aiding comprehension monitoring, this technique is enjoyable for students, since it involves a role exchange between teacher and student. Separately or together, these strategies provide an effective approach to the improvement of reading comprehension. (A reference list is appended.) (NKA)

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TEACHING READING COMPREHENSION: STRATEGIES FOR SUCCESS

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Introduction

According to Cooper (1986), much of the emphasis in helping students comprehend written text has traditionally focused on what to do before reading and after reading, but not during reading. This paper examines numerous comprehension strategies that can be successfully used with both children's literature and the basal reading series. Specific comprehension theories will be examined in light of strategies that may be used to implement them in the classroom. Children's books which are particularly suitable for each strategy are also suggested.

Developing Background

One of the major components in an instructional program in reading is developing background. Stauffer's widely used Directed Reading Thinking Activity (1969) includes development of background knowledge. Indeed, reading authorities have recommended for many years that teachers make provisions for the development of background knowledge.

While the idea of building background is not new, the realization of its importance is. Research indicates a causal relationship between the development of background and the ability of the reader to comprehend (Tierney & Cunningham, 1984). Simply stated, if teachers can develop the necessary background prior to reading, the child will do a better job of comprehending.

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The overall purpose of developing background prior to reading is to help readers relate their existing schemata to the selection or to develop new schema to help understand what is to be read. Background development needs to be related to the concepts presented in the reading.

Techniques to use include:

Questioning
Brainstorming
Webbing
Actual objects
Pictures
Discussion

These may be combined in a variety of ways!

Books which especially lend themselves to a rich development of background include:

Knotts, H. (1972). The Winter Cat. New York: Harper & Row. This is a gentle story which uses black and white illustrations. An outdoor cat is tamed by patient children. Instead of background centering on cats which are already pets, background should relate to animal needs and the differences between wild and tame animals.

Galdone, P. (1976). Puss in Boots. New York: Seabury Press. In this familiar story, a young man gains a fortune and meets a beautiful princess when his cat, the clever Puss, outwits an evil giant. This is another cat story, and yet once again background discussion about cats would not be appropriate. Instead, discussion should center about ways the children may have used their wits to escape trouble.

Prediction

The ability of students to monitor their own comprehension is important in the reading process. According to Cooper (1986) much of the emphasis in helping students comprehend has been traditionally focused on what to do before reading and after reading, but not during reading.

Searfoss & Readence (1985) recommend that teachers determine, in advance, points in a book from which predictions may be made. In other words, sufficient background must have been developed by the author, as well as a "problem" for which predictions may be generated. After reading to the given prediction point, children should be asked to make predictions about what will happen. They should also validate their predictions - "What have you read thus far that makes you think this might happen?" The suggested predictions should be written on the board.

Children should then be directed to continue reading to the next "prediction point". Their predictions may be compared to what actually happened in the story, and new predictions may then be made. It is important that the teacher avoid labeling the text as right and individual predictions as wrong. Children should be led to see that the text could have several plausible endings. They might be encouraged to rewrite the text using their own endings.

Books which especially lend themselves to predictions include:

Numeroff, L. J. (1985). If You Give A Mouse A Cookie. New York: Harper and Row. This delightful book relates the cycle of requests a mouse is likely to give after he is given a cookie. Children love to predict what the mouse will request next.

Rey, H. A. (1952). Curious George Rides A Bike. Boston: Houghton Mifflin. This is one in a very popular series of Curious George books. Because of George's curious nature, he is always getting into trouble. Children may predict the outcomes of the various situations.

Text Structure

It is important that readers recognize how an author has organized the information presented in text. Current research indicates that if students are instructed in the components of text structure and how this can be used to construct meaning, comprehension will improve (Bartlett, 1978; Gordon & Braun, 1982; Taylor & Beach, 1984).

Generally, the main parts of a narrative are: setting characters problem action resolution. Visuals, particularly story maps, can be very helpful in teaching the concepts of text structure.

Beach & Appleman (1984) note that "The importance of text structure theory for educators is that students need to learn different reading strategies for different text types".

While both narratives and expository text types should be taught, with younger children most reading is narrative, so the emphasis initially should be with narratives. Nearly any well-written book may be used for instruction and review. A book which particularly lends itself to instruction is:

Tison, A. & Taylor, T. (1974). Barbapapa's Ark. Middletown, CN: Xerox Educational Publications. Barbapapas are delightful creatures that can change their shape. In this book they make humans more aware of the effects of pollution. There are other Barbapa books available.

Imagery

A metacognitive skill directly related to reading is imagery. Huey's classic work (1908/1968) refers to imagery. He describes an experiment which involved a passage about a spider web. "A visual picture of the spider was early formed and remained throughout, although it was more or less modified to suit the different references to it as the story progressed" (p. 157).

Is there evidence that instruction in imagery will help in the comprehension of written text? In a review of

literature related to imagery, Tierney and Cunningham (1984) state "there is sufficient data for educators to be optimistic that imaging activity is effective" (p. 622).

There is not general agreement about how imagery should be taught, nor to which groups of children might benefit most from such instruction. Pressley (1976) argues that children should not be taught to simultaneously read and construct mental images. He believes that instruction in imagery should take place after passages are read.

With this in mind, one simple way to encourage imaging by students is for the teacher to read orally books which have rich descriptions, followed by discussion about what the children 'saw in their minds'. A book that lends itself to such treatment is:

Gannett, Ruth Stiles. (1976). My Father's Dragon. New York: Scholastic Books.

The ReQuest Technique

The ReQuest Technique was developed by Manzo (1969) and later adapted by Dishner and Searfoss (1977). ReQuest is an acronym for reciprocal questioning, and involves the children and teacher silently reading portions of a text and alternately taking turns asking and answering questions related to the material. It incorporates many concepts related to comprehension monitoring and metacognition. It is also enjoyable for students since the teacher and student exchange roles. It should not be confused with the

traditional directed reading lesson. This author recommends that ReQuest be used as least once weekly both primary and intermediate students. It is a fairly simple matter to incorporate ReQuest into the basal reading, or it may be used as the teacher reads literature outloud to students from favorite books.

A shortened version of the Dishner & Searfoss model includes:

1. The teacher directs the joint silent reading of a portion of the story (one sentence at a time for grades 1-2; a few sentences at a time for grades 3-4; a paragraph at a time for grades 5-6).
2. The teacher closes his/her book. Students are to keep their books open and ask the teacher questions related to the text read.
3. The teacher answers questions asked by the students and asks for rephrasing of unclear questions.
4. When the students are finished asking questions, they are to close their books and the teacher may ask questions.
5. The teacher should take care to ask questions that sample from all levels (text-explicit, text-implicit, experientially based).
6. After asking questions, the teacher should ask for predictions of what will happen next in the story.

A book that lends itself to ReQuest is George and Martha. There are others in the series, and all contain short stories which allow for numerous questions.

Marshall, James. George and Martha. New York: Scholastic.

Summary

There can be little doubt that developing background prior to reading is an important step toward comprehension. Teachers must remember to develop background concepts appropriate to the text which will be read by the students.

Prediction is another comprehension strategy which may be effectively used by readers. Predicting the results of various actions can easily be incorporated into various reading situations. The teacher must exercise caution in labeling student responses as being 'right' or 'wrong', however. As long as the response makes sense in light of what was read, the answer should be accepted. The thought process involved is what should be emphasized.

Knowledge about text structure can also enhance comprehension. The emphasis should be on students learning different strategies to use when reading different types of text.

Imagery, creating pictures in one's mind during reading, can also be encouraged by the teacher. There are many books available which contain excellent descriptions which may be used for discussing imagery with students.

ReQuest is another strategy which may be used to enhance comprehension. It involves the children and teacher silently reading portions of a text and alternately taking turns asking and answering questions related to the material. It incorporates many concepts related to comprehension monitoring and metacognition.

Nearly all these strategies may be used by teachers, either with the basal reader or with selections from children's literature. They provide a varied approach to reading comprehension based on current research.

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